A Short Paraphrase of the Canticle of Canticles

by Father Savinien Louismet, O.S.B.

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Preface

The Canticle of Canticles is the book of ecstatic love of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lover of Souls and their heavenly Bridegroom. Although the images are borrowed from the loving intercourse between two human beings, they are all to be transferred to the higher meaning, wholly spiritual, of the intercourse of love between Our Lord and the fervent Christian.

Chapter I

Verse 1. "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth." Let him love me poor as I am, dearly, let him come to me in Holy Communion. Let him give me this token of his fondness for me and of the joy that awaits me in Paradise.

Verse 2. "Thy name is sweet as oil poured out." Love to go on repeating the sweet name of Jesus. The more you do so, the more will you taste and enjoy its sweetness.

Verse 3. "Draw me." O Jesus, draw me out of my vile self, unto thee who art the sovereign Good.

"We will run after thee to the odour of thy ointments," by the exercise of divine contemplation and of good works done in a spirit of faith.

"The King hath brought me into his store-room" - that is, into the wounds of his sacred flesh, into the interior of his human soul, into the sanctuary of his very Godhead, of the Son of God that he is.

Verse 6. "Show me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feeds, where thou lies in the mid-day, lest I begin to wander after the flocks of thy companions." Here Jesus is compared to a shepherd: Is he not the Good Shepherd? He is now resting after the great labors of his earthly life and Sacred Passion; in heaven and in the Blessed Sacrament; and the fervent soul wants to keep him company, make love to him as his faithful Spouse, instead of running after purely human affections and earthly enjoyments.

Chapter II

Jesus speaking. Verse I. "I am the flower of the field, and the lily of the Valley."

Verse 2. "As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters." The pure and fervent soul replies:

Verse 3. "As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow and his fruit was sweet to my palate."

"He brought me into the cellar of wine" into his side and Sacred Heart pierced through and through. "He set in order charity in me," i.e., he set in order all my affections, subjecting them to the sway of divine love.

Verse 5. "Stay me up with flowers, compass me about with apples: because I languish with love." The flowers are holy desires, the apples the fruits of good works.

Verse 6. "His left hand is under my head and his right hand shall embrace me." The left hand means the sacred Humanity of our heavenly Bridegroom; his right hand is the splendor of his Godhead with which he envelopes and embraces so to say the soul of the fervent Christian.

Verse 7. "I adjure you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, that you stir not up, nor make the beloved to awake, till she please." Jesus entreats all who have anything to do with his faithful bride not to disturb her from her prayer and contemplation. She must be allowed, as Magdalen, to remain in peace at the feet of Jesus, or even to repose her head as John the Beloved in the last supper, on the bosom of the Bridegroom.

Verse 8. "The voice of my beloved!" In her very sleep the fervent soul hears the voice of her beloved Jesus.

"Behold he cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping over the hills." In order to come down to his rational, but sinful creature, the Son of God has to overcome great obstacles, which are as so many mountains, namely: First, his ineffable dignity and sanctity; second, the baseness of our nature; third, our original sin with its consequences; fourth, the accumulation of our own personal actual sins. The hills are all the natural laws of time, space, substance, species of bread and wine, which were so many obstacles to his coming personally to each one of us in Holy Communion.

Verse 10. "Behold my Beloved speaks to me." Ah! what joy to the soul when Jesus speaks secretly and privately to her heart, at the hours of divine contemplation and even sometimes in the midst of her saintly activities. And what does he tell her? He says: "Arise, make haste, my love, my dove, my beautiful one, and come." Come to me, fly to me, who love thee so tenderly. Here perhaps you will ask: How is it possible that Jesus should call such a sinful creature as I have been, his *dove*, his *beautiful* one? I answer: Because he has made you such by virtue of his Sacred Blood in the sacrament of Penance, and also, because his wishes run ahead of the reality; he already sees you as perfect, as he intends that you shall one day be, and by his giving you credit for what you are not as yet, he intends to stimulate you into renewed efforts towards personal sanctity and the splendor of all virtues.

Verse 11. "The winter is now passed, the rain is over and gone." The winter is your former indifference and tepidity. The rain is your multiplied infidelities and negligences and actual sins more or less grievous. "The fig tree hath put forth her green figs, the vines in flower yield their sweet smell."

Our Lord takes notice of the buddings of your good will, the flowers of your holy desires and resolutions. He is so considerate and so merciful, nothing of that which is to our credit is allowed to pass unpraised and unrewarded.

Verse 14. "My dove in the cliffs of the rock, in the hollow places of the wall," i.e., in the wounds of thy Saviour; "show me thy face," visit me often in my Blessed Sacrament; "let thy voice sound in my ears," i.e., speak to me, have something to say to me, tell me thy love: I shall never tire of listening to that tale: "for thy voice is sweet and thy face is comely." Again these compliments from the lips of our Beloved ought to cover us with confusion in the consciousness of our many miseries. But Jesus seems blind to them so much he loves us; and the more his little bride humbles herself, the more he perceives new charms in her. Nevertheless he wants her to stir herself up and apply herself strenuously to the correction of her defects, that is why he tells her in the next verse:

Verse 15. "Catch us the little foxes that destroy the vine," fight against the smallest voluntary imperfections: "they tend to destroy the loving intercourse between thee and me."

Verse 16. "My Beloved is to me and I to Him, who feeds among the lilies." Words expressive of the joy of Holy Communion, of solitary prayer and of the ardor of charity at all times.

Verse 17. "Till the day break," the day of eternal rest and beatific vision, "and the shadows retire," that is to say, the obscurities of our present condition. And yet, at times the heavenly spouse seems to withdraw himself, leaving the soul in dryness and desolation. Then she exclaims: "Return.

Be like, O my beloved, to a roe, or a young hart upon the mountains of Bether."

Chapter III

The first three verses of this chapter have reference again to the trials of the spiritual life, when dryness sets in and desolation is the result.

Verse 1. "In my bed, by night, I sought him whom my soul loveth." "By night," that is to say, by the exercise of an obscure contemplation; "in my bed," that is to say, in deep retirement from all external occupations, in recollection so deep that it may be compared to the suspension by sleep of all activities. "I sought him." I set out to meet my Lord and have the sweet intercourse of love with him.

"I sought him and found him not." What of it, O faithful soul, if you did not succeed, to your heart's content, in this search after the beloved? The essential is that you did seek him. You did not say: Oh! he has not shown himself, so, until he does, I will take what pleasure or distraction is at hand. You were in such earnest about finding him that you are quite saddened by your failure. Perhaps now you will find this state of affairs an excuse for giving yourself to what consolation creatures can offer you? No, not in the least. The fervent soul is quite determined.

Verse 2. "I will rise," she says, "and I will go about the city: in the streets and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loves: I sought him and found him not."

When the soul finds herself in dryness she must have recourse to some pious exercises. All this is represented by these expressions: "I will rise, go about the cities, in the streets and in the broad ways." I will read, meditate, say vocal prayers, administer to my flesh some punishment, make the way of the cross; in short, I will employ all the

means I can think of in order to regain the sweet feeling of the near presence of my beloved. How pathetic is this repetition of her complaint; "sought him and found him not." In spite of all I could do I remained in dryness and obscurity.

Verse 3. "The watchmen who guard the city found me: Have you seen him whom my soul loveth?" That is to say, in her distress she perhaps went to her superiors, or to her spiritual father, and disclosed to them her trouble, accusing herself of being at fault, no doubt, and unconsciously revealing how ardently she loves her heavenly spouse. They have the grace of state to discern affairs as they really are, and say just the words that are needed.

Verse 4. "When I had a little passed by them, I found him whom my soul loveth: I hold him and I will not let him go."

Most times, as soon as the soul has performed the act of humility of disclosing the interior workings of her soul to those in authority, Jesus shows to her again his sweet countenance. What joy then! How, figuratively speaking, she throws herself upon him, links her arms about his neck, and, with a sense of conquest and possession, joyfully exclaims: "I hold him, I will not let him go!"

In each one of these four verses the bride speaks of Our Lord in these terms: "Him whom my soul loveth." Her love is so great, so intense, so true, she is not ashamed to proclaim it to the world. Let men say what they please: she is not going to hide it.

And now she has her reward: in the arms of her beloved she falls into the sweet sleep of contemplation; and Jesus repeats the caution we have already met with (2:7), which runs thus:

Verse 5. "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes and the harts of the fields, that you stir not up, nor awake my beloved, till she please." Let no one interfere with her state of contemplation.

Verse 6. The angels seeing the progress of that soul in the love of God, in contemplation and the practice of all sorts of austerities, and of every virtue, exclaim:

"Who is she that goes up by the desert?" What a desert indeed is this land of exile compared with the heavenly mother-country!

"As a pillar of smoke of aromatic spices," that is to say, breathing out and spreading all around, the perfume of her sorrow for sin, and adoration of the divine majesty with acts of tenderest love, all which are figured in these words: "of myrrh and frankincense and all the powders of the perfumer."

Verse 7. A further remark suggested by this verse seven is that the blessed angels, when they witness the generous efforts and the progress of the Christian in the ways of love, speak of him among themselves, with admiration and praise. He did not want to win the praises of the world in the pursuit of vanities, behold he wins those of the saints and the blessed angels, to say nothing of the joys of his union with God.

It is still the angels who speak in the following verses to the end of the chapter. They celebrate in mysterious accents the loving intercourse of Our Lord with the soul.

Verse 7. "Behold three-score valiant ones of the most valiant of Israel, surround the bed of Solomon: 8. all holding swords and most expert in war: every man's sword upon his thigh, because of fears in the night." This is meant to describe to

us how the highest angels are employed to mount guard around a soul who has enthroned Jesus as a King in the midst of her affections. On his own part, the heavenly Bridegroom makes it his particular delight to adorn that soul so as to be a fit throne for his own sweet majesty; this is what is meant by the verses 9 and 10, which run thus:

Verse 9. "King Solomon hath made him a litter of the wood of Libanus, the pillars thereof he made of silver, the seat, of gold, the going up, of purple: the midst he covered with charity for the daughters of Jerusalem.

"The litter of the wood of Libanus," is the whole person of the loving Christian, body and soul.

"The pillars of silver" represent the clearness of his intellect informed by divine faith.

"The seat of gold" is the queen faculty of his free will wholly given to the love of Jesus.

"The going up of purple" represents how step by step he has progressed in self-denial and mortification. And finally, *the midst that is covered with charity for the daughters of Jerusalem* shows how a perfect Christian comes to see Jesus Christ in the persons of all his brethren and to love them tenderly.

Verse 11. The Angels celebrate the mystical nuptials of Jesus with the fervent soul, in these splendid terms, *Go forth, ye daughters of Sion and see King Solomon in the diadem wherewith his mother crowned him in the day of his espousals, and in the day of the joy of his heart.*

The angels invite all men to enjoy this sight of the king of heaven making his abode in the loving soul, and taking his delight in her. But in order to perceive this divine fact they

must go forth, that is to say, leave behind all vanities. Then they will see, and perhaps in their turn fall in love with King Solomon thus arrayed, and sigh after the mystical marriage.

King Solomon - Jesus is the King of Kings and he is the true Solomon of whom the other was but a faint image. He is the very Wisdom of the Father.

In his diadem - the Word of God took on himself our human nature. He took flesh in the sacred womb of the ever blessed Virgin Mary, and that is why it is said: *in his diadem wherewith his mother crowned him.* It is as though the blessed Virgin Mary sent him forth to espouse the perfect soul; as though Jesus had come into the world just for the express purpose of espousing this lowly one *in the day of his espousals - and in the day of the joy of his heart.* Oh! how good of him thus to find joy in his union with me, so poor and wretched.

The joy of his heart. Here is a revelation of His Sacred Heart, and how it ought to put us really beside ourselves with burning love!

Chapter IV

Throughout this chapter, Jesus is again breaking forth into a passionate encomium of the mystical beauty of the fervent soul.

Verse 1. *How beautiful art thou, my love; how beautiful art thou! Thy eyes are dove's eyes,* that is, they show forth the singular sweetness and simplicity of thy disposition. *Besides what is hid within.* That is, to say nothing of the charm of thy other virtues which lie hid within thy bosom.

Verse 3. *Thy lips are as scarlet lace* on account of the many acts of fervent love they weave, incessantly; *and thy speech is sweet.* Words of charity, sympathy, compassion, forgiveness, mildly and humbly spoken. *Thy cheeks are as a piece of pomegranate, besides that which lies hid within.* That is, virginal modesty shows itself by the readiness with which the cheeks redden and is the token of how pure are the affections of the heart within.

Verse 4. *Thy neck is as the tower of David, which is built with bulwarks: a thousand bucklers hang upon it, all the armour of valiant men.* The neck stands as the emblem of a clean and well-formed conscience, which does not allow either sin or scruples and false notions about morals to creep in. It stands self-protected. The thousand bucklers are the innumerable considerations upon which a good Christian leans for the avoidance of sin. *The valiant men* are the saints who have given us such examples of a right conscience. At verse 6 the bride seems fearful less such a high encomium of herself might make her vain, so she interposes the memory of her own past sins and the ineffable sanctity of God, saying:

I will go to the mountain of myrrh by the exercise of sincere compunction, tears of sorrow and the practice of some austerities. *And to the hill of frankincense*, by the prayer of adoration. We may also take Calvary to be the mountain of myrrh, and our altars where the holy sacrifice of Mass is offered to be the hill of frankincense.

Till the shadows retire, the shadows of our present condition of earthly life, where the grand realities of the supernatural order are not perceived clearly . . . and "the day break," the day of eternal light, and life, and glory, the day of the beatific vision.

As though stimulated by this humble and loving protestation of his bride-elect, the heavenly bridegroom praises her with renewed eagerness.

Verse 7. *Thou art all fair, O my love, and there is not a spot im, thee.* This is true of the newly baptized, whether infant or adult; of every Christian who has gained a plenary indulgence; and of every fervent soul who has made, either in confession or out of it, an act of perfect contrition, or again an act of perfect love of God. We ought to be very desirous of establishing ourselves in a state so pleasing to Our Lord.

Verse 8. The eighth verse demands to be reset and read thus: *Come from Libanus, my spouse; come from the top of Amana, from the top of Sahir and Hermon, from the dens of the lions, from the mountains of the leopards: thou shall be crowned.* The bride has been alluding to the day of her death; Jesus now looks forward to that day as the one when he will be able to set on her head the crown of glory and he hastens it, saying in anticipation: *Come from Libanus*, etc.

All these different places named in the first part of the verse are figures of the exalted states of contemplation of a fervent soul. "The dens of the lions and the mountains of the leopards" on the other hand serve to show that the servant of God during the present life is not afraid to venture into the midst of sinful men in large cities to exercise the works of an active and apostolic life.

Verse 9. *Thou hast wounded my heart, my sister, my spouse*. Oh how good to hear these words from the lips of Our dear Lord. Formerly I used to wound his heart by the heinousness of my sins, but now no more. What a change! It is by my poor affections that the heart of my Saviour is pleasurably affected. The Sacred Heart of my Jesus, thrilled by my repeated acts of love! Oh! what an encouragement!

Thou hast wounded my heart with one (glance) of thy eyes, and with one hair of thy neck. That is to say, with the least of thy prayers or of thy actions because they are all done with such an intensity of divine love.

Verse 11. *Thy lips, my spouse, are as a dropping honeycomb; honey and milk are under thy tongue.* By these expressions Our Lord means to expatiate on the extreme delight he takes in our communions. *And the smell of thy garments, as the smell of frankincense.* After a fervent communion, the bride consumes herself in acts of adoration and thanksgiving which exhale as from her garments a smell comparable to that of burning incense.

Verse 12. *My sister, my spouse.* By his Incarnation, the Son of God became my true brother, by flesh and blood and the affections of a human heart; and now by the grace of his sacraments I become wedded to him in the bonds of a mystical union. *Is a garden enclosed.* A garden in which are beautiful flowers of holy desires and the trees of many

virtues, whose fruits are acts meritorious unto eternal life. It is enclosed: no one else but the Beloved is admitted into it. *A fountain sealed up.* So that neither the beasts of the field nor the passers-by can drink of it and make it muddy: that is, all my affections are kept for Jesus and Jesus alone. I do not allow myself either to love or to be loved by anyone outside of the pure love of Jesus.

Verse 13. *Thy plants are a paradise of pomegranates with the fruits of the orchard. Cyprus* (vine) *with spikenard.*

Verse 14. *Spikenard and saffron, sweet cane and cinnamon, with all the trees of Libanus, myrrh and aloes with all the chief perfumes.* In all these emblematic plants and perfumes we may see an image of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit working wonders in a soul wholly abandoned to his inspirations.

Verse 15. *The fountain of gardens*. What is it but the grace of God? whilst the well of living waters which run with a strong stream from Libanus is nothing else but the abundance of charity with which the servant of God comes from the height of contemplation down to the performance of all acts of mercy corporal as well as spiritual.

Verse 16. *Arise, O north wind, and come, O south wind.* That is to say, let spiritual joy and tribulations come turn and turn about upon this soul of good will. *Blow through my garden.* She is to me a garden of delights; and it is all one, whether she be in desolation or consolation.

Let the aromatic spices thereof flow, i.e., let the sweet perfume of all her virtues be spread abroad.

Chapter V

This chapter is most beautiful.

Verse 1. *Let my beloved come into his garden.* Here is a new and fine way of expressing the soul's desire for holy communion. *And eat the fruits of his apple trees*, and take what delights he can in the acts of those virtues which he himself has planted in me.

Jesus replies directly after communion: *I have come into my garden, my sister, my spouse;* I have indeed found in it many delights. *I have gathered my myrrh*, that is, the devotion of the soul for my Sacred Passion, *with my aromatic spices*, or the devotion to my sacred body after its descent from the cross and its entombment. *I have eaten the honeycomb with the honey*, that is to say, I have found great delights in the various acts of thy thanksgiving and in the very substance of thy body and soul, O fervent Christian: for they are as the frame or the honeycomb from which this honey proceeds. *I have drunk my wine with my milk*, the milk is together the humility and meekness of the mystic soul, which virtues Jesus calls his, for so they are indeed. The wine is the fortitude and generosity with which a fervent soul bears all sufferings, and these again Jesus calls his, for they come straight from his sacred wounds and from his heart. And now he turns to the other two persons of the Blessed Trinity and invites them to share his delights in that soul, saying: *Eat, O friends, and drink, and be inebriated, my dearly beloved.* In the meanwhile the bride has entered into a state of deep recollection and contemplation. Then it is that she says:

Verse 2. *I sleep, and my heart watches*; that is, everything in me is motionless, but my love is very active. I can hear *the*

voice of my beloved knocking and saying: *Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled: for my head is full of dew, and my locks of the drops of the nights.*

Happy the loving soul to whom Jesus comes thus to find in her a shelter from the ingratitudes and rebuffs of the world. Happy the soul with whom he wants to have the sweetest intercourse of divine love! But she must not put him off or keep him waiting on any pretext whatsoever. She must take him at his own chosen moment, not at her own convenience. It appears the bride of the Canticle had yet to learn this by experience. She said: Verse 3. *I have put off my garment, how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet, how shall I defile them?* That is to say, there is a certain ceremonial I have used until now; certain private practices of devotion to which I cling . . . allow me, O my beloved, first to attend to them, and then after that I shall be wholly given up to thee . . .

Verse 5. *I arose up to open to my beloved . . .* 6. *I opened the holt of my door to him,: but he had turned aside and had gone. I sought him and found him not, I called and he did not answer me.*

Verse 7. *The keepers that go about the city found me: they struck me and wounded me; the keepers of the walls took away my veil from me.* This means that the bride, seeing how foolishly she had acted, went to tell her distress to her superiors or to her spiritual father. But this time they handled her case rather roughly, and tore or took away from her the cloak of self-love in which perhaps unconsciously she had wrapped herself. Now she gives no thought but to Jesus and she turns to the blessed angels and the dear saints for help.

Verse 8. *I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved that you tell him that I languish for love.* How charming is that way of expressing her feelings towards the Beloved! And how charming also is the way in which these friends of the pilgrim soul, solace her grief! They make her speak of him; they ask her:

Verse 9. *What manner of one is thy beloved of the beloved, O thou most beautiful among women?* The blessed angels do not spare their praise of a soul of good will. Such a soul is indeed the most beautiful object among all the other works of the hands of God. *What manner of one is thy beloved that thou hast so adjured us?*

Verse 10. The bride replies: *My beloved is white and ruddy: ruddy* from the glow of his divine nature and *white* from the immaculate flesh he took from the Virgin womb of his mother Mary. Again, *white* from his dazzling innocence, *ruddy* from the shedding of his blood for sinners. Again *white* in the blessed sacrament under the species of bread; *ruddy* under the species of wine. Then she proceeds to give a full description of him from head to foot, as she contemplates him stretched on the cross. Every word of this description is to be applied literally, not figuratively, as far as possible: I mean it is indeed the head, the hands, the feet, etc., of Our Lord which come here each one for its meed of praise as it suffered so much for us.

Verse 11. "His head (is as) the finest gold; his locks as branches of palm trees, black as a raven."

Verse 12. "His eyes as doves upon brooks of water, which are washed with milk, and sit beside the plentiful streams."

Verse 13. "His cheeks are (as) beds of aromatic spices set by the perfumers. His lips are as lilies, dropping choice myrrh";

namely, the seven words on the cross. "His hands (are) turned (and as) of gold, full of hyacinths," "as of gold" on account of the miracles and other works of mercy they have performed. They moreover are "full of hyacinths," that is to say, of the drops of clotted blood from their being cruelly nailed to the cross. "His belly (as) of ivory, set with sapphires," the whiteness of his sacred flesh showing the more that it is sprinkled with his own blood, every drop of which is so precious that it could pay the ransom of thousands of guilty worlds.

Verse 15. "His legs as pillars of marble." Noble pillars indeed, which support a temple of God as is the whole body of Christ. "Set upon bases of gold," namely, his sacred feet so beautiful and so cruelly nailed to the wood of the cross. "His form as of Libanus excellent as the cedars."

Verse 16. "His throat most sweet," as being the organ by which he has uttered such words of loving mercy.

"And he is all lovely." Is not this a good summing up? "Such is my beloved, and he is my friend, O ye daughters of Jerusalem." There is a very human and feminine note of legitimate pride in the possession of such a friend. It is well that the Christian should express his sense of the immense honor done to him by Our Lord in coming as he does so lovingly and so unceremoniously. Only a true friend and lover will act in this wise.

Verse 17. Now that the soul has had all her say about the beauty and winsomeness of her beloved, her heavenly friends can press the question:

"Whither is thy beloved gone, O thou most beautiful among women? Whither is thy beloved turned aside and we will seek him with thee."

They call her "Most beautiful" because indeed in the eyes of the angels and saints, nothing out of paradise is so entrancingly beautiful as the fervent Christian soul enamoured with Christ.

"We will seek him with thee"; that is, so great is our compassion and sympathy in thy great trouble, that we will follow thee, keep thee company, help thee all we can with our intercession, until he sees fit to show himself to thee again. Such is the tender love of our friends in heaven!

Chapter VI

Verse 1. "My beloved is gone into his garden, to the bed of aromatic spices, to feed in the gardens and to gather lilies." "His garden," that is to say, the Divine Essence of the most Holy Trinity, for God is to himself his own garden of delights, infinitely spacious and marvelous. There does the sacred Humanity of Our Lord feed, out of the bed of aromatic spices of the divine perfections, and gather armfuls of the lilies of the ineffable sanctity of the three divine persons.

Verse 2. But is it not marvelous also that whilst he is enjoying himself thus in the splendor of the Blessed Trinity, Our Lord should find the means of giving himself to me, to little me, here on earth, so sweetly and so wholly that I can exclaim:

"I to my beloved, and my beloved to me, who feeds among the lilies."

O Christian soul, love to repeat these words: "I to my beloved and my beloved to me." They are expressive of such an intimate intercourse of love as is impossible of attainment to the poor votaries of mere human love or friendship; but here, God's omnipotence is at our service. I am the intimate friend, the bosom friend, of God, of each one of the three divine Persons!

Specially after holy communion may I say with singular propriety: "I to my beloved and my beloved to me, who feeds among the lilies." And since he is such a lover of purity, oh! how I must vie in the exercise of that virtue with his very angels!

Verse 3. No sooner has the soul come to this resolution of an heroic practice of purity for love's sake than she is invested with the very splendor of God, and Our Lord exclaims:

"Thou art beautiful, O my love;
Sweet and comely, as Jerusalem;
Terrible as an army set in array."

"Sweet and comely"; what a praise to receive from the lips of the Son of God! But, "sweet and comely as Jerusalem," that is to say, as heaven itself. How can this be? In this wise: When a soul is quite pure it resembles a placid lake in the crystal waters of which heaven reflects itself.

"Terrible" to the arch enemy, the devil, and to all his black hosts of fallen angels. "Terrible as an army set in array." One single soul, still in its infirmities of a pilgrim on earth and yet already formidable to all hell. But why marvel? She is united to God; she is one with Jesus Christ. Oh! what a power, what a tower of strength in the church of God, is one single fervent saintly soul!

Verses 6, 7. "There are three-score queens, and four-score concubines and young maidens without number: one is my dove; my perfect one is unique, she is the only one of her mother, the chosen of her that bore her."

There is a deep and entrancingly beautiful meaning hidden under the enigmatic figures taken from the harem of the most magnificent of oriental princes. "The queens" are the great saints. "Threescore" stands for any large number. "The concubines" designate souls consecrated and united to Our Lord Jesus Christ by religious profession; their number is even greater than the first.

"The young maidens without number" are those souls who are as yet imperfect although already marked and set aside

by divine love, because he knows that they will grow out of their spiritual infancy and be his one day.

However, although the heavenly Bridegroom has so many who love him and whom he loves most tenderly, it » the privilege of his Godhead that he is able still to love me with a love as personal, full, absolute and exclusive, and to give himself to me, as though there were no others but we two in the world: He and I. He expresses this Mystery in these words: "One is my dove." And Holy Church entering into that spirit sets as much value upon each individual soul as though it was the only one she had to care for. That is why he adds: "The only one of her mother, the chosen of her that bore her."

"The daughters" (of the heavenly Jerusalem), that is to say, the blessed angels, "saw her and declared her most blessed"; "the queens and the concubines," as above, "and they praised her." The angels and saints talk of us in heaven, and exclaim upon the beauty of the soul in the state of grace and bestow unstinted praise upon her. How good to think of this! How encouraging! How well we are rewarded already for the contempt in which we hold worldly honor and esteem and admiration! Hear what these dwellers of paradise say to one another about the fervent Christian yet on earth:

Verse 9. "Who is she that cometh forth as the morning rising, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army in array?" Fair as the moon by the purity of her intention and innocence of her life; bright as the sun by the intensity of her charity and the splendor of her other virtues; terrible indeed as an army, since a Christian who faithfully uses the weapons of prayer and the sacraments is able single handed to put to flight whole hosts of devils.

Verses 10, 11. The bride now gives an account of some of her mystical experiences. In figurative language she tells us how she went into herself, possibly with a view to ascertaining whether all the praises she heard about herself were true; and though such an act of introversion was not prompted by a motive of vanity, yet it was not without some danger of self-complacency. Therefore Our Lord did not permit her to have a clear view of how matters stood with her. All this is charmingly expressed in these words:

"I went down in the garden of nuts
To see the fruits of the valleys,
To look if the vineyard had flourished
And the pomegranates budded."

And with what result? With this:

"I know not." I remained in the dark as to the object of my enquiry. Nay:

"My soul was troubled." Troubled for what?

"For the chariots of Aminadab"; that is to say, by the consideration, which pressed itself upon me, of the severe justice and consuming sanctity of God, which oppose the sinner as so many war-chariots.

The Angels and Saints are sorry that she should take a gloomy view of her own case and in order to reassure her, they say to her:

"Return, return, O Sulamitess; return, that we may behold thee"; that is to say, turn thy eyes, thy contemplation cheerfully towards us, and to the unfailing fountain of our delights, namely the glory and the transcending goodness of God.

Chapter VII

The last two chapters of the *Canticle of Canticles* are all about the last stage of the mystical life on earth, namely, the state of the perfect soul, in the Way of Union. Because of the sublimity of the mysteries hidden under the material emblems of womanly beauty and human love, it is extremely difficult to do justice to the text, and this we must leave aside for the present. We will be satisfied with commenting on the following verses:

Verse 10. *I to my beloved and his turning is towards me.*

By these words: "I to my beloved," the perfect soul shows us how delicate and indissoluble is her union with him. Let us repeat "I to my beloved" with a yearning that it may be true for us also. Let us ask: Is it indeed so? And if not, what is the obstacle? What is there to do? Oh! give me the courage needed to break down every obstacle! Deus in adjutorium meum intende. My God help me!

After the last Supper, in that wonderful effusion of his love, which makes up Chapters XIV, XV and XVI of the Gospel of Saint John, Jesus said to his Apostles: "Abide in me, and I in you." It is the wish of his Heart that we may at last make our own these words of the Canticle: "I to my beloved."

"And his turnings are to me." Those two love each other mutually, so they are all in all to each other. I have endeavored to describe something of the exclusiveness and at the same time all-inclusiveness of this mutual love of the fervent soul and the heavenly Bridegroom in my little book on *Divine Contemplation for All*, Chapters XXIII-XXV. I refer you to these chapters.

Verses 11, 12 and 13 show to us under various graceful images how the apostolic spirit betrays itself in that perfect soul which one would naturally suppose to be fit only for the exercise of divine contemplation.

Verse 11. *Come,* she says, *my beloved, let us go forth into the field, let us abide in the villages.*

Verse 12. *Let us get up early to the vineyards, let us see if the vineyard flourish, if the flowers be ready to bring fruits, if the pomegranates flourish . . .*

Verse 13. *The mandrakes give a smell. In our gates are all fruits: the new and the old, my beloved, I have kept.*

So it is that, no sooner had the divine wonder of wonders of the Incarnation taken place in Mary, than *rising up, she went into the hill-country with haste into a city of Juda, into the house of Zachary and saluted Elizabeth*, and made herself useful to her in all the ways she could think of.

So it is that all the saintly founders of active religious orders, such as Saint Ignatius Loyola, Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Jean Baptiste de la Salle, etc., have found in the very ecstasy of their love of God and contemplation, the fountain-spring of their apostolic zeal.

So it is that the most contemplative orders, wholly secluded from contact with the world, such as the Carthusians or again the Carmelite Nuns and the Poor Clares, in the intensity of their charity, embrace the whole world in their continual prayers.

But notice a great difference in the methods of the Saints and those of pure philanthropists or Christians who are much given to active life but very little to prayer. It is marked in these words of verse 11.

"Come, my beloved, *let us* go forth . . ." The true servant of God never suffers himself to be separated from the Beloved; the true Christian does not pretend to do it all himself. He is well aware that without the grace of God we can do nothing, whilst leaning upon the omnipotent arm of Jesus, we can do all things. "Without me," says Jesus, "you can do nothing." (John 15:5.) "I can do all things," says Saint Paul, "in him who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13.) "Gladly will I glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. I please myself in my infirmities . . . for when I am weak, then am I powerful." (II Corinthians 12:9,10)

Chapter VIII

We are now at the last chapter of the Canticle of Canticles and it is undoubtedly the most mysterious and the most sublime of all. The consuming ardors of the desire of the bride for the heavenly Bridegroom vent themselves in accents such as the following:

Verse 1. "Who shall give Thee to me for my brother?"

Verse 2. "I will take hold of thee . . ." And suddenly she finds herself in his embrace and can only murmur as she goes off in the rapture of a divine contemplation higher than she has hitherto experienced:

Verse 3. "His left hand (is) under my head and his right hand shall embrace me." That is to say, I lean on all the mysteries of his sacred Humanity, and "the infinite loveliness of his Godhead enfolds me."

And the heavenly Bridegroom repeats with increased earnestness his entreaty:

Verse 4. "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you stir not up, nor awake my love until she please." Let no one interfere with her contemplation at this stage. In the eyes of the angels she now appears so beautiful that they exclaim:

Verse 5. "Who is this that cometh up from the desert, flowing with delights, leaning upon her beloved! . . ."

The desert is this vale of tears; but as the Christian is near the end of his life, he is coming up from the desert; and when he has grown in the love of God and in perfection the near prospect of death far from causing him any fright or

pain is a source of joy to him: is not his soul leaning upon her beloved? Is she not coming home to paradise? The very thought fills her with delights; they even overflow to the amazement of all who are witnesses of the fact.

And yet all is not yet done. There remains some few years or months or perhaps only days for the bride to live and work and endure here on earth. How will she be able to do so? Her Beloved is at hand. He tells her what to do:

Verse 6. "Put me as a seal upon thy heart, as a seal upon thy arm: for love is strong as death." That is to say, "Now more than ever, O beloved soul, let all thy affections and all thy actions be only for me."

Verse 7. "Many waters cannot quench charity, neither can floods drown it." To see how true that is for the soul enamored with Jesus we have but to turn to Saint Paul. Listen how he sings his unquenchable love of Christ:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation? or distress? or famine? or nakedness? or danger? or persecution? or the sword? As it is written: For thy sake we are put to death all the day long. We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. But in all these things we overcome because of him that hath loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor Angel, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor might, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:35-39)

Towards the end of her life the bride is assaulted by such transports of divine love as well nigh might encompass her death. The heavenly bridegroom keeps telling her:

Verse 14. "Thou that dwellest in the gardens, the friends hearken." The friends, that is to say, all the blessed angels and saints are attentive to our intercourse of mutual love.

"Make me hear thy voice." I am never tired of hearing your sighs of love. Do give some vent to the fervor of your soul; pour it out in speech: it would hurt you to keep it in.

But the poor languishing soul does not want to get well, fears nothing so much as to be left still longer here on earth; and yet she dares not ask in so many words for her death. So she puts it in this enigmatical language, feeling quite sure his Heart will understand. She says:

Verse 15. "Flee away, O my beloved." Yes, go back to paradise, the home of thy glory, but not alone; ah! not alone: take me there with thee! Let us both together be "like to the roe, and to the young hart upon the mountain of aromatic spices."

The mountain of aromatic spices is the most Holy Trinity and its infinite perfections as revealed in the splendor of the beatific vision. The roe stands here for all the blessed angelic natures; the young hart does duty for all the orders of the Saints from both the Old and the New Testament. And thus this entrancing book of the Canticles closes upon a glimpse of the Heavenly Jerusalem.

About This EBook

The text of this ebook is taken from the article "A Short Paraphrase of the Canticle of Canticles", by Father Savinien Louismet, O.S.B., published in The American Catholic Quarterly Review, October 1921.

The cover image is a detail of a manuscript of a sermon on the Canticle of Canticles by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, illuminated by Sister Cecilia, c.1545. The original is currently part of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana manuscripts in Florence, Italy, was photographed on 15 March 2018 by Sailko, and the image swiped from Wikimedia Commons.

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